# The Accidental Assassination?

## Book Adds Twist to JFK Theories

2/27/92 By David Streitfeld
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Today, a book will be published that offers a breakthrough of sorts: It's the first time the blame for President Kennedy's death has been pinned on a named, living person: a Secret Service agent.

Already "Mortal Error" is finding a less than receptive audience—and that goes beyond the Secret Service saying "It's so absurd it doesn't deserve a comment."

"It's amazing," said Mark Lane, author of "Plausible Denial" and a leading conspiracy theorist. "Twenty-eight years later, someone has come up with a concept that almost makes the Warren Commission seem credible. I suggest that the author and the publisher go take a hot bowl of chicken soup and get a long rest." Lane, it should be noted, says the CIA did it.

"Mortal Error" tells the story of Howard Donahue, a 69-year-old Baltimore firearms examiner and former gun-shop owner. Donahue agrees with the Warren Commission view that Oswald was the lone assassin. But he also believes that a Secret Service agent riding in the car behind the presidential limo accidentally

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Saint Martin's Press is publishing 125,000 copies of "Mortal Error," which is a hefty number in these recessionary times. But there's clearly a huge market out there. Last Sunday, the Nos. 6 and 14 hardcover nonfiction spots as well as Nos. 1, 4 and 8 paperback nonfiction books on the New York Times bestseller list were offering wildly conflicting viewpoints on whodunnit to JFK and why.

"Mortal Error" has an unusual feature in a 17-page "note from the publisher" written by Saint Martin's Chairman Thomas McCormack justifying publication of the book as in the public interest. The note documents the unsuccessful attempts to convince the Secret Service agent, now retired and living in suburban Maryland, to talk or indeed respond at all, and the lengthy process through which they arrived at a decision to publish.

"We at St. Martin's do not unani-



# JFK Book

ASSASSINATION, From D1

fired a shot. After Oswald fired twice, this agent allegedly reached for the AR-15 rifle at his feet and, in the confusion of the moment, discharged it. The bullet sliced through Kennedy's brain.

A slip of the finger, according to his theory. A stroke of really bad luck. Nothing personal at all. This wasn't a conspiracy—although the resulting cover-up was. Can you imagine the embarrassment, Donahue asks, if this had come out?

Donahue bases his theory on ballistic, medical and other evidence, especially that the behavior of the bullet is more consistent with the AR-15 rifle the agent had than Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle.

mously feel that Donahue has proved his AR-15 case beyond a shadow of a doubt," the publisher writes. "His conviction is strong but we cannot say his argument absolutely precludes the possibility he is wrong."

If he is, there seem to be certain possibilities for a lawsuit. "Many books are published with a certain amount of known jeopardy," McCormack conceded yesterday. "What happens here I will not predict. The book tries to show as much compassion for [the agent] as possible."

The agent's phone number is unavailable at his request, and he could not be reached by The Washington Post for response, which is why his name isn't published here.

"He's very sick, and his family has asked that he not be contacted about this," said Secret Service spokesman Carl Meyer, who added that "I don't see how this is going to do his mental health or well-being any good at all."

According to a random sampling, the world of JFK assassination buffs is not going to embrace Donahue's notion. They've heard it before—Donahue first voiced it in an interview with the Baltimore Sun in 1977—and while they haven't had a chance to read the book they didn't think this was the way things happened.

"Very weak," pronounced David Lifton, author of "Best Evidence." One problem: Donahue uses X-rays and photographs from the Bethesda autopsy. But this conflicts with Lifton's central thesis that the wounds were altered sometime in Dallas. Donahue's data, he says, "is not to be trusted."

"Absolutely incredible," JFK Assassination Information Center codirector Larry Howard said yesterday.

Howard would like to point out that it's absolutely clear the shot in question came from the grassy knoll, "where 78 witnesses said it came

from." His villain: "rogue elephants in the CIA and the Mafia as a junior partner, and then covered up from the very top."

(Maybe he said "rogue elements"? Most of these guys talk very fast, as if they're going to burst before they say all they must.)

Harold Weisberg, author of the "Whitewash" series of assassination books, said, "I rank it with the tooth fairy. Publishers have gone though the bottom of the barrel with JFK material, and are now in the sewers. The existing evidence that Donahue didn't use proves it didn't happen that way."

The consensus among the buffs interviewed was that, in the ranks of odd JFK assassination theories, this particular one was odd but not off the charts. "One of the most outrageous was the guy who said his father, a Dallas policeman, was the assassin on the grassy knoll. He said he found the truth in his father's papers after his death."

Lifton, meanwhile, reminisced about the theory that JFK's limo driver did it. "If you have a crappy copy of the [Zapruder] film, it looks that way. He turns around twice." The current pusher of this view, he added, "has linked it up with a screwy UFO theory."

Even if you buy the thesis and evidence in "Mortal Error," it wouldn't change much. Donahue, whose 25-year quest is recounted in the book by journalist Bonar Menninger, says that one of the two bullets Oswald fired would have killed him anyway.

The agent's bullet finished the president off quicker, which allows the publisher to use the cleverly misleading subtitle "The Shot That Killed JFK."

"If you could see the X-ray and the condition of his spine, you would look at it and say I doubt very much if he would lived," said Donahue from New York yesterday as he was preparing to announce his theory to the world on the television talk shows.